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June 12, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Robert Wilkie and Secretary Mark T. Esper,

I write out of great concern for our active duty servicemember and veteran populations, particularly those that suffer from their exposure to burn pits, given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical that this vulnerable population receive the care and treatment they deserve for putting their lives on the line and risking their health — which may be exacerbated by COVID-19 infections. I ask that you please respond to the following questions:

1. Knowing both that COVID-19 may have a more disastrous impact on those with respiratory health problems and that those exposed to burn pits are in jeopardy of having respiratory health problems, are the DOD and VA asking servicemembers and veterans being tested for COVID-19 if they have previously been exposed to burn pits?
2. How many veterans who have reported being exposed to burn pits, whether or not they are registered on the Burn Pit Registry, have been tested for antibodies?
3. How many servicemembers and how many veterans who have reported being exposed to burn pits, whether or not they are registered on the Burn Pit Registry, have been tested for COVID-19? And, of those, how many tested positive?
 - a. Of those, please break down the data to explain how many have tested positive, how many likely are positive due to the presence of antibodies, and how many are presumed positive based on reported symptoms?

- b. Also, of those, how many cases have resulted in hospitalization, how many have resulted in death, how many individuals were asymptomatic, and how many have recovered and been discharged?
4. As of the date of this letter, for servicemembers and veterans who have reported being exposed to burn pits, whether or not they are registered on the Burn Pit Registry, how many total cases of COVID-19 infection remain active — either under investigation or are being treated — and how many have been closed — whether due to death or recovery?
 - a. Of those cases that resulted in hospitalization and/or death, please explain what the reason for hospitalization and/or death was — e.g. heart conditions, pneumonia — and please explain additional details of the case, such as length of hospitalization, and whether they were treated for COVID-19 infection in or outside a VA facility.
5. Of the total cases of COVID-19, how many servicemembers and veterans were registered on the Burn Pits Registry? Of those, how many had previously received or were currently receiving care for health problems reportedly experienced by those exposed to burn pits?
6. How many facilities have treated servicemembers or veterans who have reported being exposed to burn pits for COVID-19?
 - a. How many cases per facility?
 - b. How many deaths per facility?
 - c. In which facilities have deaths occurred?
7. Knowing that COVID-19 may have a more disastrous impact on those with respiratory health problems, what are the DoD and VA doing with regard to outreach, services, and care coordination for servicemembers and veterans infected by COVID-19 who have also been exposed to burn pits, respectively?
8. For all questions above related to individual servicemembers and veterans, please analyze and provide data broken down by demographics, such as age, race, and sex; whether the individual had any pre-existing conditions and a compilation of types of pre-existing conditions; how the individual's care was administered and coordinated; and whether the VA and/or DoD engaged in contact tracing for these individuals and their families.

Veterans already are at higher risk for health problems due to age, mental health, and pre-existing conditions. Additionally, they are at greater risk of vulnerability due to economic hardship, homelessness, and challenges accessing health care or getting timely support and benefits. These risks are not only endured by the veterans themselves, but also their families and loved ones. The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to exacerbate these problems, across the board — from making existing health problems worse, to placing additional economic strain on them and their families, to the availability of and access to adequate care.

As of April 28, 2020, the Burn Pits Registry now has over 200,000 individuals.¹ But, the data is available only as far back as six years ago, potentially leaving out millions more that could have been exposed to burn pits and should be accounted for on the Registry. This population clearly is a major concern during this pandemic as demonstrated by the VA, wherein, the VA has posted information about the risks to members on the Burn Pits Registry.² It has also been reported in the news³ that the VA is sending emails to registry participants to warn them of possible vulnerabilities to coronavirus complications, which include severe respiratory deficiencies and failure.

It is for the reasons outlined above that your response to this letter, and your care and attention to this vulnerable population be swift, accurate, and decisive. I request a formal response to my inquiries by June 15, 2020.

Sincerely,



Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress

¹ See U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, *available from*: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>.

² *Id.*

³ See Military Times, "Burn pit victims could face greater dangers from coronavirus, VA warns," May 06, 2020, *available from*: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/05/06/burn-pit-victims-could-face-greater-dangers-from-coronavirus-va-warns/>